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How much of our happiness is within our control?¹

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In reviewing articles for the “no” side of this issue, there were several individual perspectives on why we psychologists should take caution before announcing to the public that we know how to make people happier. However, there was no culminating piece containing the variety of lines of logic & research that inspire this warning. Thus, the purpose of this piece is not to insist that we have absolutely zero control over our own happiness. Rather, it is to summarize the evidence suggesting that we have much less control over it than positive psychologists typically espouse.

1. The heritability of happiness: In 1989, a group of researchers began a wildly ambitious and comprehensive study of twins called the Minnesota Twin Family study. They used comparisons of identical twins, fraternal twins, and other family members to determine the proportion of the variation in the public’s happiness scores that is caused by genetic factors, which is called the *heritability* of happiness. In 1996, two of the researchers (David Lykken and Auke Tellegen) published a paper reporting that the heritability is around .50, which means about half of the variability we see in the population’s happiness scores is caused by people’s genes, and about half by other things. Most psychologists would concede that a person cannot change his or her genes, so it follows that at least one major cause of happiness lies outside of our control.
2. The Hedonic Treadmill: In 1978, Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman published a well-cited study showing that people who had befallen great fortune (lottery winners) or great tragedy (recent paraplegics) returned to their pre-existing levels of happiness within a year following the event. A re-analysis of the data from the study showed that the paraplegics’ level of happiness really never fully returned to baseline. Nevertheless, follow-up research has been done on the topic and most psychologists agree that people do adapt emotionally to most of the good and bad events in life and have a surprising tendency to remain very near their pre-existing level of happiness despite life’s slings and arrows. This has been called “hedonic treadmill theory” because no matter how fast or slow people “run”, they stay in the same place (emotionally of course). This is good news because it means we have the capacity to adapt to the inevitable tragedies and problems of life, but it is

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also bad news because, for most people, it precludes ever attaining everlasting bliss.

The two points made thus far comprise the portion of this “no we cannot make ourselves happier” argument that is generally accepted, and even pointed out, by most positive psychologists (King, 2008; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Ben-Shahar, 2007; Lyubomirsky, 2007). The points that follow may be viewed as more controversial.

3. The famous 40%: Sonja Lyubomirsky is most often cited by positive psychologists and the media as the person who has cracked the happiness code and made the fruits available to all (Ben-Shahar, 2007; King, 2008; Larsen & Prizmic, 2008; Peterson, 2006; Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). In her book *The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, she summarizes the research showing that happiness is 50% heritable and 10% due to well-studied demographic variables. She claims that *what that means is that* the remaining 40% of happiness is within our control. To illustrate this concept, the cover of her book contains a pie with 40% removed and the claim, “this much happiness – up to 40% - is within your power to change.” Her book has been touted by many as scientific evidence of great news: we have a surprisingly high level of control over our own happiness. There are a few problems with this conclusion, though.
 - a. She misuses heritability estimates. Heritability estimates estimate the proportion of individual differences, or variation, in scores *among a group of people* that can be attributed to their genes. They describe variation in a group, and cannot be applied to any individual person¹. There are undoubtedly people whose happiness lies largely within their control, and others who suffer from life circumstances that will likely cause lasting and inescapable misery. It is the job of positive psychologists to study these sorts of distinctions rather than making the misleading claim that everyone has an equal capacity for increasing his or her happiness.
 - b. Even if the 40% estimate were valid (which, as I just explained, it isn't), it is not accurate to claim that whatever portion of our happiness is not due to genetics and not due to as-of-yet carefully studied demographic variables is by default within our control. That 40% estimate would simply include *everything else*- everything besides genes and the demographic variables that have been carefully studied. That leaves room for many situational and personality variables that likely have a strong impact on our emotional state. Home foreclosures, lost jobs, unfaithful spouses, chronic illness, unplanned pregnancies, miscarriages, broken down cars and other daily hassles, work/life conflict, marital discord- the list is practically endless of things that would be included in that “everything else”

portion, and the very important question remains as to which of those variables matter most, and to what extent those variables are actually within our control.

- c. The evidence for the effectiveness of existing happiness interventions is shaky and unclear. Several positive psychologists have their own prescriptions for how to increase one's own happiness. These prescriptions are generally based on scientific research², and most involve happiness exercises you can do easily at home to boost your happiness. There are currently two lines of research that have received the most attention that claim to increase happiness. In her book, Sonja Lyubomirsky describes exercises such as a *gratitude exercise* (wherein you contemplate 5 things you are grateful for at the end of each week), committing regular acts of kindness toward others, and distracting yourself when things are going badly rather than ruminating (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Seligman et al. (2005) have tested 5 similar strategies and found scattered effects with 3 of them (though they also found temporary effects with an unconvincing placebo exercise). Although these interventions are often referred to by positive psychologists as promising evidence that we can boost our own happiness, the actual effects of these interventions are unimpressive. Though Lyubomirsky's book does not include actual data from her studies, a careful reading of the original journal articles reporting her results shows that many of the strategies have weak, improperly derived, or even unreported statistical effects that only show up at all under a very specific set of circumstances. Her 2005 paper is most commonly cited as scientific evidence that happiness-boosting interventions can work. However, in the actual paper, the *gratitude exercise* only mattered for people who did it once per week (not three times per week) and the *acts of kindness* exercise only mattered for people who did 5 acts of kindness all in one day for 6 weeks straight (not people who spread the acts out). Additionally, I use the term "mattered" rather than "worked" because the data themselves were not reported in the article, nor were the results of any statistical tests³. Indeed, Boehm & Lyubomirsky's (2009) chapter in the Handbook of Positive Psychology reviews 8 studies, each testing several of what they call successful activities for increasing happiness. But the whole of the chapter contains mention of only one statistically significant result. The situation is surprisingly bleak considering the methodological features of her studies that should stack the results in her favor⁶. Nevertheless, her book has been translated into 11 languages and she is cited by positive psychologists and the media alike as having uncovered lasting keys to happiness. Several crucial questions remain: Do these exercises really increase happiness at all? If, so what boundary conditions are necessary for them to work?

Are they ineffective for some people, and can they even have drawbacks?²⁴ Will any boost to happiness resulting from these exercises be long-lasting?²⁵ Given what we know about the hedonic treadmill, and given that emotional adaptation is even faster for good events than for bad ones (Larsen & Prizmic, 2008), it seems likely that any benefits that people might gain from these interventions would dissipate quickly over time.

4. The trouble with the denominator: It might be surprising to most people to learn that personality psychologists have found that positive and negative affect (PA and NA) are independent of each other. This means the people who experience the most positive emotions are not necessarily the people who experience the least negative emotions. Furthermore, most psychologists accept the proposition that our subjective well-being is defined, in emotional terms, as our ratio of positive to negative affect. So to make a person happier, you could increase the numerator (PA) *or* decrease the denominator (NA). Unfortunately, there is also a well-documented pattern of findings across various sub-fields of psychology that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenouer, and Vohs, 1991). Bad events have a deeper and longer lasting impact on us emotionally than good events. This is called the *negativity bias*, and it is interpreted by most as having an evolutionary purpose: avoiding threats helps us survive; relishing in accomplishments does not. What all this suggests is that one would get more bang for his buck by trying to eliminate the causes of negative emotion in his life than by trying to increase the positive. This has been pointed out in the positive psychology literature (Larsen & Prizmic, 2008)⁷, but it remains largely ignored or even dismissed by most positive psychologists, as their “declaration of independence” depends on their determination to focus on increasing the positive and not dwelling on the negative. To make matters worse, while bad is stronger than good, it also seems evident that many key sources of negative affect (such as those listed in paragraph 3b) are largely if not fully outside of people’s control. Indeed, Diener et al. (2006) recently stressed the need for a *revised adaptation (hedonic treadmill) theory* based on results from a large longitudinal study investigating whether or not people’s life satisfaction levels are stable across time. They concluded that most people’s were largely stable (which fits with hedonic treadmill theory), but that a portion of people (about 25%) have more fluctuating levels of life satisfaction. What variables did they find have a significant and lasting impact on life satisfaction? Unemployment and widowhood (both negative and outside of our control) had the strongest effects, with divorce having significant but smaller effects (an event most people view as negative and often outside of their control). It was in this article that they pointed out that paraplegics and other disabled people (again, negative and outside of their control) actually do not return fully to baseline. The lottery winners did not gain any lasting happiness from their wins (a positive event outside of their control). In fact,

almost all the data cited in their review shows that, though life satisfaction may fluctuate, it seems to be lastingly influenced primarily by events that are negative and outside of our control. Another comprehensive study by Diener, et al. (1995) compared well-being data from large samples of people from 55 nations and found that subjective well-being was higher among people who lived in nations that were wealthier, individualistic, and that protected their citizens' human rights. Few people in countries that lack these characteristics are there by choice.

There is some debate as well among psychologists as to whether we *should* be trying to increase happiness in the American public, most of who report being pretty happy already (Diener, 2008; Diener & Diener, 1996; Lazarus, 2003). That is an issue for another day. The question here is, *if* we concede that boosting happiness is a worthwhile goal to pursue for psychologists, to what extent is doing so *possible*? Careful research has shown that happiness is by no means predetermined or “fixed” by genetics. Psychologists have uncovered a variety of environmental variables that predict (correlate with or cause) happiness. However, we must not confuse prediction with control. Nobody chooses to become a widow, be confined to a wheelchair, live in an impoverished nation, or lose their job. Many of the most influential environmental variables in our lives are every bit as uncontrollable as our genes.

In the field of psychology, unbridled enthusiasm often gives way to skepticism, and this is a good thing for the field. Psychology has a long history of demonstrating that people like to be in control of their surroundings and they like to be happy. It comes as no surprise that they would embrace the finding that they are in control of making themselves happy. But the job of psychologists is to make claims based on objective interpretation of scientific evidence. Objective interpretation seems to point more to the idea that most of what influences our happiness in large and lasting ways lies outside the realm of the controllable.

Footnotes:

¹ See Diener, 2008 for a lengthier explanation of this concept.

² Psychologists agree that any finding in the field of psychology as well as any claims for treatment or intervention must be based on scientific research, so this is a good thing. However, claiming that one's opinions are based on scientific research has become somewhat of a free pass to say whatever you want as long as there is at least some trend in your data that is consistent with your theory. Most psychologists are not going to take the time to sift through the details of others' (often unpublished) data and publish purposeful criticisms of others' work, and most laypersons do not have the skills to judge the quality of research. Therefore, whether or not the quality and results of the research actually warrant the claims being made is a question that often goes unchecked.

³ The results were described by bar graphs, which showed increases in well-being of .4 points for the acts of kindness exercise and .15 points

(identical to the magnitude of change for the control group, incidentally) for the gratitude exercise. However, because there was no information on the scale or its end points and no statistical analyses were presented, it is impossible to judge what these values mean. One can only assume the results were not statistically significant, in which case it is misleading to refer to this article as evidence that these two activities increase happiness.

⁴ For example, the advice to stop ruminating probably has a lot of cash value for a chronic ruminator, but for most normal, well-adjusted people, ruminating can signal to us that we need to do something about a problem in our environment. Indeed, evolutionary and personality psychologists agree that negative emotions exist because they serve a purpose. Stifling the emotion, though more affectively pleasant, may not always be in our best interest.

⁵ Occasionally researchers do conduct follow-up studies several months down the road. When they do, they often find mixed success, meaning that people are still a little happier who engaged in some of the exercises, but people who completed other exercises have returned to baseline (if they ever budged at all).

⁶ E.g., lack of a convincing placebo control group (even though there is evidence that placebos have an effect in these types of studies), multiple measures of happiness and subjective well-being as dependent variables (which increases the overall probability of finding a significant result due to chance), and instructions telling participants that the researchers *expect* the exercises to boost people's moods (which can influence participants' responses).

⁷ Larsen & Prizmic estimate that bad events impact us about 3.14 times as strongly as good events.

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